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RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUFOADA/JAC MOLESWORTH RAF MOLESWORTH UK PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEUITH/ODC ANKARA TU PRIORITY
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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL SAADET PARTY HEAD LOOKS TO THE PAST

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ISTANBUL 00000516 001.2 OF 002

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Sadrettin Karaduman, Saadet Party (SP) Istanbul Party Chairman spoke longingly about past glory days when his party controlled the city's administration. Karaduman credited mayors from SP's previous political organizations -- Welfare (Refah) Party (RP) and Felicity (Fazilet) Party (FP), for major improvements in the city's infrastructure. Karaduman failed to give credit to RP's most notable former mayor, Prime Minister Erdogan. Despite being out of government, SP can still bring out a crowd, Karaduman argued, such as when SP organized protests against the Pope's visit in 2006. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) During a September 5 meeting with us, Karaduman waxed nostalgic about the glory days when RP and FP -- the predecessors to SP -- controlled the mayor's office for greater Istanbul. Karaduman was joined by SP Deputy for Foreign Affairs Mustafa Kaya and two other party officials. Karaduman credited his previous party's administration for improvements to Istanbul's infrastructure, particularly expanding the city's transportation and water systems. Karaduman claimed it is this solid history of good governance that will bring SP bring back into power in the local elections scheduled for March 2009. Not surprisingly, Karaduman failed to give any credit to former RP mayor and now PM Erdogan, leader of the rival AKP. Instead, Karaduman blamed AKP for harming Turkey's economy, particularly for driving up the current account deficit and high unemployment. Karaduman, however, failed to make any specific policy distinctions between SP and the AKP, relying on general statements to lay out the failings of his former political partners.

The Party Can Bring Out the Faithful

13. (SBU) Karaduman highlighted SP's ability to bring its supporters to the streets. He told us SP has numerous grassroots supporters eager to support the party and come out en masse upon demand. (COMMENT: Tens of thousands of protestors attended a SP rally opposing the Pope's visit to Istanbul in 2006. Also in 2006 SP held rallies in Istanbul criticizing Israeli policies towards the Palestinians and protesting the "Danish cartoon," both of which drew thousands of demonstrators. END COMMENT) Responding to our question, Karaduman stated the Izmir branch independently organized

their own anti-Israeli rally last spring, without approval from the national organization. This is one of SP's strengths, according to Karaduman. Its local leaders are able to take the initiative on their own. Karaduman said SP rewards such proactively, promoting local organizers who work hard and demonstrate they have broad appeal.

No Compromise on Headscarves

¶4. (SBU) Karaduman was disappointed by the Constitutional Court's decision upholding the ban on headscarves in universities. He regards wearing headscarves as a basic right, just as is a university education for women. Karaduman told us the court's verdict will simply perpetuate this injustice, forcing this issue to come up again in the future. Karaduman acknowledged the issue is divisive in Turkey, yet he did not see any compromise that SP could accept.

Still Milli Gorus Despite Different Party Names

¶5. (SBU) In a rare show of support for AKP, Karaduman criticized the practice of banning political parties in Turkey. Karaduman argued that the recent attempt to ban AKP is evidence that Turkey's political system is not truly democratic. The biggest blows to Turkish democracy, he said, were the bans of RP and FP, as well as the so-called "post-modern coup" conducted by the military in 1998 against then Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, the leader of RP. Deputy Chairman Mustafa Kaya, told us the political parties RP, FP, and SP are actually all part of the same Milli Gorus

ISTANBUL 00000516 002.2 OF 002

movement. The political parties are expendable arms, he said, that can be disposed of without harming the core organization. Kaya said it is unfortunate that Milli Gorus needs to play this charade, but that it is necessary given the limited freedom in the current political system. (Comment: While Erbakan established the Milli Gorus movement in 1975, not all of its members aligned themselves with SP. Most notably, AKP has a sizable Milli Gorus wing (reftel). End Comment.)

¶6. (SBU) Kaya insisted the English translation for Milli Gorus ("National View") is confusing since it falsely labels the party as nationalist. Kaya stressed Milli Gorus's focus is worldwide and should not be associated with nationalism, especially the ultra-nationalist National Action Party (MHP). Throughout our meeting, Karaduman, Kaya, and the other party members stressed that SP's aim is global: it hopes to assist the entire world's population, by promoting world peace and social justice.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT: SP's political efforts appear directed more towards stirring up its grassroots supporters rather than winning elections. Support for the party typically falls in the low single digits in the national polls. It is not viewed as a serious contender in Istanbul in the upcoming local elections. The party's ability to fill the streets on a particular issue on short notice, however, can certainly draw the public's attention.

WIENER